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OVERTURE FILMS PHOTO

Jeff Bridges stars as Bill Django, a character based on the real-life Jim Channon, who trained at Fort Holabird and dreamed of transforming the military into a holistic band of brothers.

Battlefield beyond

KENNETH K. LAM/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO

Dale Graff, a former Marylander who directed the Stargate "remote viewing" program at Fort Meade, at a Baltimore showing of the film.

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The makers of "The Men Who Stare At Goats" have planted this epigraph before the movie: "More of this is true than you would believe." But I heard one young man emerging from a preview saying, "I don't think *any* of this is true."

After all, who in their right mind would buy a story about a visionary Army officer embracing Eastern martial arts and West Coast encounter sessions, then recruiting new American fighting men who would "fall in love with everyone," "sense plant auras," "attain the power to pass through objects such as walls," "have out-of-body experiences" and "be able to hear and see other people's thoughts"?

And who could accept that this battalion employed psychic powers to locate a hostage halfway around the world — and to stop the heart of a goat?

But that visionary, Bill Django, played by Jeff Bridges, is based on a real man, Jim Channon, who did his military-intelligence training at Fort Holabird in Baltimore County (and lived at the Colony in Towson when he was doing it). In the 1970s and 1980s, he did engage commanding officers and fellow members of the think tank Task Force Delta in his dream of transforming the military into a holistic band of brothers. They rewarded him by reading him official orders to become commander of the First Earth Battalion.

Of course, this battalion (in the film, the New

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Tale of holistic band of brothers

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Earth Army) was a mind-expanding network, not a formal fighting group, with no set address except Task Force Delta and maybe Mother Earth. Its members were among the first on the planet to keep in touch through e-mail

And many of the exploits that the filmmakers ascribe to Channon's troops were done just a few miles from Baltimore, at Fort Meade. The site was two crumbling barracks belonging to a Defense Intelligence Agency unit devoted to "remote viewing" — the term for envisioning an unseen target using extra-sensory perception. Dale Graff, a sometime-Marylander who now lives in Hamburg, Pa., directed the program and gave it an enduring name: "Stargate."

Channon's goal was to re-imagine the American soldier as a "warrior monk" — equally deft at war and peace, destruction and healing. Graff aimed to pursue untapped powers of perception while locating Cold War targets or drug smugglers through Stargate members' super-intuitions.

Both men have healthy appetites for humor and similar mixed feelings for the movie. On the phone from Hawaii, Channon says it's only "one-third accurate." But he salutes the moviemakers because "it's really hard in the modern world of the trivia hairball to get anything important out to the public ... and they have made it so the paranormal doesn't seem like witchcraft."

As a man with a talent for seeing a few days into the future, Graff, a subtle joker, wrote these words *before* he saw the movie: "I laughed at the ridiculous antics of the characters. ... [But] while we laugh, are we not also acknowledging something hidden within ourselves that can be uncovered?" Afterward, he considered his pre-review pretty accurate.

The film's surefire, black-comic attention-getter is the scene of a New Earth soldier named Lyn Cassady (George Clooney), under duress, focusing a high-energy glare on a still, silent goat — and killing it.

But the best sources believe that in real life, no kind of psychic projection leveled the animal. John Alexander, Channon's close friend and one of the models for Clooney's character, says that what felled the goat was "*dim mak*, a relatively obscure martial arts skill known in English as *the death touch*." On the phone from Las Vegas, where he lives, Alexander asks, "Have you ever seen a bullet wound in a body? You see not just a hole but a path of radiating energy. I saw the photos of the necropsy of that goat. And there was a similar path of energy across the chest — except there was no exit or entrance wound."

Alexander objects to the way Jon Ronson's book and Peter Straughan's screenplay erroneously connect this action to Channon's group and obscure the serious point behind the episode. An American army hero named Col. Nick Rowe explored the death touch — a light touch, not a heavy blow — as a method that hostages or POWs could use after days or weeks of physical weakening in captivity.

But Channon and Graff praise the movie for continually pushing its audience to think outside the banker's box of the traditional military-industrial complex.

DALE GRAFF PHOTO 1992

Dale Graff has continued to write books and lead seminars and workshops aimed at extending human instinct and perception.

Graff might practice precognition, but when he watched the film last week in Baltimore, he felt something else: "deja vu." Graff says the film gets several anecdotes dead right. The psychic who stops a hamster dead in its tracks — or, rather, stops it dead before it even hits the tracks of its rotating wheel?

"That was based on a Soviet test, but the Soviets staged the test with rabbits instead of hamsters." The use of remote viewing to rescue a U.S. general kidnapped by the Red Brigade in Italy? Joe McMoneagle, one of the Stargate psychics, won the Army's Legion of Merit "for providing information of critical value unobtainable from any other source on over 200 specific targets," including Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier, who was taken in Italy in December 1981 and rescued in 1982.

Some key scenes re-enact or echo several of Graff's pivotal experiences. In a skit straight out of an Abbott and Costello farce, two American military men discuss the need to ignite an inner-space race with the Soviets. At one point, our Cold War enemies thought that American authorities had experimented with ESP to communicate with the USS Nautilus, the first nuclear submarine.

International investigators uncovered a French hoax behind the Nautilus story. But the Soviets thought the *hoax* was a hoax — just another cover story — and raced full-bore into psychic research.

Graff says he had that same discussion with his commander at the Air Force's Foreign Technology Division, right after he "instinctively" put his hands on a classified report of Soviet ESP research. That talk eventually led him to the top of Stargate. (Now he's convinced that the U.S. did perform ESP experiments with submarines.)

Graff objects to the film depicting American psychics recklessly ingesting LSD and even spiking eggs and water with acid. "Our work could not involve 'non-ordinary consciousness,' meaning — No drugs! Those parts were silly." But some of the movie's intimate observations genuinely connected to him, especially a near-death experience that opens Bridges' heart and brain to new human potential. Graff had one of those himself.

And the psychics' use of idiosyncratic warm-up techniques rang clatteringly true. One of Graff's men, an American Indian, "worked with beads" to prepare for remote viewing, and another listened to hard rock.

On the phone from Austin, Texas, the hard-rock man, Paul H. Smith, laughs as he adds, "But I'd listen to Dolly Parton, too! It was all to get me 'psyched up.' " When approached at Fort Meade to join the unit in 1983, he had what he calls "a 'Men in Black' moment" as he walked toward the ramshackle barracks. It was all so mysterious and exciting — and well-funded, despite the headquarters' appearance. He made the decision to join "in 10 seconds." The decrepit quarters helped Stargate hide in plain sight. Rhode Island Sen. Claiborne Pell, on a briefing tour, once peered under the deteriorating steps and asked "Where's the wino?"

"Remote viewing should be called 'remote perception,' " says Smith. His own most startling vision came with a huge audio component. In 1987, on a Friday, he was asked to answer the question, "What's important for us to know about the next few hours?" He received an impression of a large metallic structure in a body of water and, in the distance, an aircraft dropping two cylindrical, winged objects that made "a whirring, guttering sound." When he came in Monday, he learned that an Iraqi plane had struck the USS Stark with a couple of roaring winged Exocet missiles.

Smith says, "Pardon the pun, there's a tiny kernel of truth" when it comes to Channon's influence on the be-all-you-can-be, all-volunteer army. "And I shouldn't say tiny — Col. Channon isn't small." Smith has criticized "The Men Who Stare at Goats" for linking ESP and Channon's New Age mind experiments to Abu Ghraib, a connection that "doesn't stand up to scrutiny."

Graff and Channon agree. Graff says remote viewers are especially sensitive to "staying away from 'the dark side' because it usually comes back to haunt you." Channon abhors the way "four of my ideas out of 125" have been connected to psychological warfare and atrocities in Iraq in order to fit a predetermined thesis: "How does good stuff go bad?"

It certainly didn't go bad for these two men. Graff has continued to write books and lead seminars and workshops aimed at extending human instinct and perception. Channon lives "on an eco-homestead" and promotes a crusade dubbed "Operation Noble Steward," calling for a united global military to handle ecological problems.

Channon's First Earth Battalion never recruited psychics. But he believes that he saved lives in Vietnam by relying on hunter's skills that could be considered psychic. And he feels ESP is "necessary" for American successs in contemporary conflicts. "The secret of modern warfare is, don't get into danger zones. You can't do that without extended awareness."

So in the end, the entertaining farrago of make-believe and scrambled history in "The Men Who Stare At Goats" doesn't faze Channon. He compares his collision with Hollywood to "a 'meeting engagement.' That's when two armies bump into each other and make a mess. The ones that are quickest on their feet win. I've been quick in this case. So far it has been an amazingly successful engagement."

Spoken like an honest-to-God, flesh-and-blood Jedi warrior.